NAXOS

Marvellous Mezzo-soprano and Contralto

BEST LOVED OPERA ARIAS

Best loved opera arias for

Mezzo-soprano and Contralto

1 **Georges BIZET** (1838–1875)
Carmen (1875) 1:58
Act I – Seguidilla: Près des remparts de Séville (Carmen)
Marjana Lipovšek, Mezzo-soprano
Munich Radio Orchestra • Giuseppe Patanè
(Orfeo C179891A)

2 **Wolfgang Amadeus MOZART** (1756–1791)
Le nozze di Figaro 2:48
('The Marriage of Figaro') (1786)
Act II, Scene 2 – Voi, che sapete che cosa e amor (Cherubino)
Michelle Breedt, Mezzo-soprano
Nicolaus Esterházy Sinfonia • Michael Halász
(8.660102-04)

3 **Gioachino ROSSINI** (1792–1868)
La Cenerentola ('Cinderella') (1817) 3:20
Act II, Scene 3 – Non più mesta…(Cenerentola)
Ewa Podleś, Contralto
Hungarian State Opera Chorus and Orchestra
Pier Giorgio Morandi (8.553543)

4 **Giuseppe VERDI** (1813–1901)
Macbeth (1847, revised 1865) 4:00
Act II – La luce langue (Lady Macbeth)
Agnes Baltsa, Mezzo-soprano
Munich Radio Orchestra • Heinz Wallberg
(Orfeo C171881A)

5 **Christoph Willibald GLUCK** (1714–1787)
Orfeo ed Euridice ('Orpheus and Eurydice') 4:06
(1762, revised 1774)
Act III, Scene 1 – Che farò senza Euridice? (Orfeo)
Marjana Lipovšek, Mezzo-soprano
Munich Radio Orchestra • Giuseppe Patanè
(Orfeo C179891A)

6 **Gioachino ROSSINI**
L'Italiana in Algeri 4:23
('The Italian Girl in Algiers') (1813)
Act I, Scene 4 – Cruda sorte! Amor tiranno! (Isabella)
Ewa Podleś, Mezzo-soprano
Hungarian State Opera Chorus and Orchestra
Pier Giorgio Morandi
(8.553543)

7 **Camille SAINT-SAËNS** (1835–1921)
Samson et Dalila 5:40
('Samson and Delilah') (1877)
Act II – Mon cœur s'ouvre à ta voix (Dalila)
Marjana Lipovšek, Mezzo-soprano
Munich Radio Orchestra • Giuseppe Patanè
(Orfeo C179891A)

8 **Gaetano DONIZETTI** (1797–1848)
Lucrezia Borgia (1833) 1:35
Act II – Il segreto per esser felice (Orsini)
Nidia Palacios, Mezzo-soprano
Orchestra and Chorus of the Bergamo Musica Festival 'Gaetano Donizetti'
Tiziano Severini
(8.660257-58)

9 **Gioachino ROSSINI**
Il barbiere di Siviglia 5:53
('The Barber of Seville') (1816)
Act I, Scene 2 – Una voce poco fa (Rosina)
Sonia Ganassi, Mezzo-soprano
Failoni Chamber Orchestra
Will Humburg (8.553436)

10 **Antonio VIVALDI** (1678–1741)
Orlando furioso 4:25
('The Frenzy of Orlando') (1727)
Act II, Scene 8 – Nel profondo cieco mondo (Orlando)
Sonia Prina, Contralto • I Barocchisti
Diego Fasolis
(Dynamic CDS7803.03)

11 **Pyotr Il'yich TCHAIKOVSKY** (1840–1893)
Pique Dame ('The Queen of Spades') (1890) 3:26
Act I, Scene 2 – Podrugi milie (Подруги милые) (Polina)
Ludmila Shemchuk, Mezzo-soprano
Bavarian State Orchestra • Algis Zhuraitis
(Orfeo C811112I)

12 **Gaetano DONIZETTI**
La favorite ('The Favourite') (1840) 6:37
Act III – O mio Fernando (Léonor de Guzman)
Agnes Baltsa, Mezzo-soprano
Munich Radio Orchestra • Heinz Wallberg
(Orfeo C171881A)

13 **Giuseppe VERDI**
Aida (1871) 3:55
Act IV – L'aborrita rivale a me sfuggia (Amneris)
Barbara Dever, Mezzo-soprano
National Symphony Orchestra of Ireland
Rico Saccani (8.660033-34)

14 **Wolfgang Amadeus MOZART**
La clemenza di Tito 6:40
('The Clemency of Titus') (1791)
Act I, Scene 9 – Parto, ma tu ben mio (Sesto)
Tatiana Troyanos, Mezzo-soprano
Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra • James Levine
(Orfeo C938172I)

15 **George Frideric HANDEL** (1685–1759)
Serse ('Xerxes') (1738) 3:37
Act I – Frondi tenere… Ombra mai fu… (Xerxes)
Marjana Lipovšek, Mezzo-soprano
Munich Radio Orchestra • Giuseppe Patanè
(Orfeo C179891A)

16 **Gioachino ROSSINI**
Semiramide (1823) 5:30
Act I – Ah! Quel giorno ognor rammento (Arsace)
Ewa Podleś, Contralto
Hungarian State Orchestra
Pier Giorgio Morandi (8.553543)

17 **Richard WAGNER** (1813–1883)
Siegfried (1876) 3:06
Act III, Scene 1 – Mein Schlaf ist Träumen (Erda)
Deborah Humble, Mezzo-soprano
Matthias Goerne, Bass-baritone
Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra
Jaap van Zweden (8.660413-16)

18 **Giuseppe VERDI**
Un ballo in maschera 3:40
('A Masked Ball') (1859)
Act I, Scene 2 – Re dell'abisso affrettati (Ulrica)
Ludmila Shemchuk, Mezzo-soprano
Vienna State Opera Chorus and Orchestra
Claudio Abbado (Orfeo C907162I)

19 **Georges BIZET**
Carmen (1875) 2:57
Act I – Habañera: L'Amour est un oiseau rebelle (Carmen)
Marjana Lipovšek, Mezzo-soprano
Munich Radio Orchestra • Giuseppe Patanè
(Orfeo C179891A)

Total Timing: 78:32

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Mezzo-soprano and Contralto

Introduction

'Parto, parto' ('I'm leaving, I'm leaving') sings Sesto [14]. But he *doesn't* leave. In fact, it takes him six more minutes of parto-parto-ing before he finally heads off.

If you want reasons why people don't like opera, this aria provides several. It's implausible. The words are endlessly repeated. A female singer pretends to be a man. No wonder that Dr Johnson, the great English lexicographer, defined opera as *exotic* and *irrational*.

He wasn't wrong. But here's the thing. Although opera is not *realistic,* it is *real*. Sesto's aria is one of the most beautiful expressions of indecision, doubt and conflicted desire you'll ever hear. He stays because he's torn. No, it wouldn't be plausible in real life. Yes, he repeats himself. But if you can find more artistic truthfulness anywhere else, I'll eat my hat.

Opera offers truths which are otherwise inexpressible.

A History of Opera

For an art form which has had such a profound impact on global culture, opera has a surprisingly short history. It was invented in about 1600 in Italy. A group of academics, hoping to recreate the chanted speech of ancient Greek theatre, developed a method of giving sung notes to the words of dramatic characters. Hey presto! – they'd stumbled upon opera: *drama told through music*.

It quickly took off. The wrenching pathos, the opportunities for comedy, the grandeur of great music combined with powerful stories… Opera was about *real* emotions, and *real* situations, but heightened to a point of sublimity.

As with all art forms, conventions soon arose. Songs for individual characters became known as *arias*. Quick-paced dialogue, in a less melodic style, was called *recitative*. An opera might have some *duets,* or *trios,* or a *chorus*. The accompanying orchestra began to grow too.

Certain musical forms began to dominate the art form. In the Baroque period (early 18th century) operas mostly fell into the category of *opera seria: Orlando furioso* [10] is a good example. The distinguishing feature of an *opera seria* is a type of aria which always repeats its opening section after a contrasting interlude. This is known as a *da capo* aria (or a 'go back to the beginning aria').

At this stage, it was the singers – not composers, not librettists, not producers – who were the most important people of the opera world, and sometimes they demanded ridiculous changes in storytelling merely to suit their egos. In 1762 Gluck tried to reform opera back to purer principles in *Orfeo ed Euridice* [5], and this opened the way for more experimental works, such as *Le nozze di Figaro* of 1786 [2], with its innovative use of ensembles and emotional variety.

In the early 19th century, this in turn developed into a new style called *bel canto* (literally 'beautiful singing') which emphasised singers' virtuosity in long-held phrases and brilliantly sparkling fast passages [3] [6] [8] [9] [12] [16]. Verdi pushed this style towards *grand opera,* which involved bigger crowd-scenes and epic backdrops. [4] [13] [18]. Wagner [17], uniquely, used complex recurring melodies and symbolic characters to create a style all his own. Opera had another flowering in the late 19th-century *verismo* style, which exploited sexually heightened conflicts, before it headed into several different *modern* pathways, some more successful than others, in the 20th and 21st centuries.

If you're wondering why this history has only covered Italian opera – partly, it's because the Italians were on the scene first and so controlled the field. But it is also because the Italian language, with its open vowels and easy consonants, is a wonderfully straightforward language to sing. All other national schools of opera – including French [1] [19], Russian [11], German, and English – have thus defined themselves in a *pro* or *contra* relationship with the globally dominant Italian product.

The Mezzo-soprano and Contralto Voice

The term *mezzo-soprano* (literally 'half soprano') now denotes a low female voice. Soprano denotes a high voice.

That's the simple way of putting it. Unfortunately there are plenty of contradictory, overlapping, and confusing sub-categories too.

The term *mezzo-soprano* first appeared in print only around 1750, but its meaning was vague until well after 1800. Until that time, composers didn't write for a 'type' of voice, but for an individual singer. If she happened to have a low or high voice, that was simply her nature. All women were sopranos.

When operas started to become repertoire items in about 1800, and were presented and revived in different cities with new singers over and over again, the categories of roles and voice types became more defined. The Germans, being excellent taxonomists, gave us the word for such a category: *Fach*.

There are several *Fachs* within the mezzo category. A *coloratura* mezzo is suited to virtuosic displays of speed in Baroque and *bel canto* works; a *lyric* mezzo can usually be found in roles which do not demand too much volume – the works of Gluck and Mozart provide good examples; a *dramatic* mezzo has the stamina to tackle the decibel-heavy roles of Verdi; and the very lowest female voice is usually called a *contralto* or *alto* – Wagner's Erda is often taken by such a singer. As already stated, these terms overlap, and are often used vaguely.

It's necessary to highlight one more peculiarity of the mezzo repertoire, which is that many of the roles are for male characters. Sometimes this is because the parts were originally written for *castrati* (castrated males) who sang at a high pitch, and women often now take those roles. But sometimes it is because composers simply enjoyed exploiting the ambiguous frisson of seeing women dressed as men: Cherubino 2 is a good example. All these parts are called *travesty, breeches,* or *pants roles*.

1 **Seguidilla** from ***Carmen*** (1875)
Carmen is a free-spirited Spanish gypsy under arrest for attacking another woman with a knife. In this aria, she tells her guard – the infatuated soldier Don José – about a local tavern. If José will let her go free, she will meet him there and give him a good time.

19th-century French composers loved the mezzo voice for its richness and sensuality (see 7), and in *Carmen* Bizet wrote perhaps the best-known mezzo role of all time. France also had a love-affair with all things Spanish. Bizet here adapts the rhythms of a frisky, triple-time dance for two people called a *seguidilla*.

2 **Voi, che sapete ('You, who know')**
from ***Le nozze di Figaro*** (1786)
Cherubino (the name means 'little cherub') is an adolescent page-boy in the service of Countess Almaviva. He sings her a song expressing his adoration, and how much he suffers from unrequited love.

Cherubino represents a hormonal storm of adolescent male desire, with all its pains and pleasures. But it was written for a woman, and in the French play upon which the opera is based – see 9 – the spoken role was also written for an actress. Composers have always been aware of the ambiguous and erotic consequences of cross-dressing on stage.

3 **Non più mesta ('No longer sad')**
from ***La Cenerentola*** (1817)
Angelina, the downtrodden step-daughter of the pompous Don Magnifico, is treated like a servant in her own household. She falls in love with a lowly valet, but at the end of the opera it is revealed that the valet is in fact a prince in disguise. In this joyous and dazzling aria, Angelina sings that her days of drudgery are over, and she forgives her family for all her past mistreatment.

Rossini pushed the virtuosity of the human voice to new levels of excitement, with ever faster scales, runs and ornaments, but never for the sake of mere empty display. Here those musical fireworks express Angelina's exhilaration at her new-found love and happiness.

4 **La luce langue ('The light diminishes')**
from ***Macbeth*** (1847, revised 1865)
When a prophecy reveals that Banco will found a new royal dynasty, King Macbeth realises that must prevent it by murder. Here Lady Macbeth calls on the powers of darkness and evil to aid the crime.

The role of Lady Macbeth is sung now by either mezzos or sopranos. It mostly lies low enough for the former, but it also has some high notes at the end of the famous 'sleepwalking scene' which are better suited to the latter. (They are so high, in fact, that sometimes performers employ another singer, offstage, to sing them instead.) But when a full-throated, rich-voiced mezzo gets her teeth into this dark and thrilling aria, the rewards are immense.

5 **Che farò ('What will I do')**
from ***Orfeo ed Euridice***
(1762, revised 1774)
When Orfeo's wife dies, he uses his beautiful singing voice to persuade the gods to give her back to him. On the journey back to earth, he breaks the rules and turns back to look at her. She dies again, and he sings this heartbreaking lament over his twice-lost love.

Gluck originally composed the role of Orfeo for an alto castrato. He quickly revised it for a soprano castrato, and then in 1774 gave it to a high tenor. But when a mezzo sang it for the first time in 1859, she set the pattern for next 150 years, and now male performances are extremely rare.

The version of the aria given here, with its heightened musical repetitions at the end, is from the 1774 revival.

6 **Cruda sorte! ('Cruel fate!')**
from ***L'Italiana in Algeri*** (1813)
Isabella, the Italian Girl of the title, steps ashore in Algeria from a shipwreck. She has come to find her lover, Lindoro, who has gone missing. Summoning all her courage, and a cheerful dose of self-possession, she announces that nothing will get in the way of her aims.

Rossini wrote *L'Italiana* when he was just 21 (and composed it, according to legend, in 18 days), and you can hear youthful ebullience sparkling through every note of Isabella's fizzing entrance aria. He later revisited this type of self-confidence statement in the entrance aria for Rosina 9 in *Il barbiere di Siviglia*. Rosina's lover, funnily enough, is also called Lindoro.

7 **Mon cœur ('My heart')**
from ***Samson et Dalila*** (1877)
Dalila, a beautiful Philistine and implacable foe to the Israelites, vows to use all her wiles to discover the secret which lies behind the legendary strength of her enemy Samson. After a long seduction scene, Samson

eventually confesses that he loves her, and she replies with this hauntingly beautiful aria. In the opera it becomes a duet, but is often performed in concert as a solo.

Although gifted with a fine ear for melody, and a fluent ease of orchestration, Saint-Saëns mostly lacked the emotional engagement needed to write successful operas. Of all his twelve attempts at the genre, only *Samson* is still performed – and ultimately due to the power of this blockbuster aria.

8 **Il segreto per esser felici**
('The secret to being happy')
from ***Lucrezia Borgia*** (1833)
Maffeo Orsini, a young nobleman, leads his boisterous young friends in a drinking song. Unknown to them all, Lucrezia Borgia has poisoned their goblets in order to kill them.

The 'brindisi', or drinking song, is an enormously popular sub-genre within opera. The most famous one is perhaps the 'Libiamo' from Verdi's *La traviata,* but there are plenty of others too. All of them are ostensibly upbeat celebrations of the delights of alcoholic intoxication, but often – as here – a dramatic irony undercuts the jollity.

Curiously, the term 'brindisi' has nothing to do with the Italian city of the same name. It has its etymological roots in the German phrase 'bring dir's' ('I offer it to you').

9 **Una voce ('A voice')**
from ***Il barbiere di Siviglia*** (1816)
Rosina is the young ward of the pompous and domineering Doctor Bartolo. He keeps her at home under lock and key, but she has fallen in love with Lindoro, a young man who has serenaded her outside her window. In this, her sparkling entrance aria, she describes the excitement of love, and tells us (rather like Isabella, see 6) that she has tricks and stratagems to conquer anything her guardian can put in her way.

'Lindoro' is actually Count Almaviva in disguise, and the two lovers are joyously united at the end of the opera. Unfortunately, their happiness is short-lived. The same characters reappear in Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro* 2 (which, although it is a chronological sequel, was composed earlier) and there we discover that the Count proves faithless.

10 **Nel profondo ('Deep inside')**
from ***Orlando furioso*** (1727)
The impetuous warrior Orlando is in love with Angelica. She doesn't return his love, and tries to kill him by asking him to bring her a magic potion from a cave guarded by a wild beast. Orlando quickly realises he has been tricked, but fights his way to freedom.

Vivaldi rarely employed women for male leads: in an earlier version of this opera the part of Orlando was written for bass. But for this completely new re-writing in 1727, he cast Lucia Lancetti as Orlando, such was the power of her acting and singing.

11 **Podrugi milie ('Dear friends')**
from ***The Queen of Spades*** (1890)
Polina is having a jolly time with a group of her girlfriends, who ask her to sing them a song. She responds with this haunting aria (actually called a 'romance' in the opera) about the power of the all-conquering grave. It's a strange dramatic jolt, which hints at the tragic ending of the opera.

Polina is the secondary female character in the opera, after Liza, the heroine. Russian opera followed the standard Italian practice of the late 19th century in giving lead roles to sopranos, and subordinate roles to mezzos.

12 **O mio Fernando ('Oh, my Fernando')**
from ***La favorite*** (1840)
Leonora has long been the 'favourite' (i.e. the mistress) of the king, but when she is given the chance to marry her true love Fernando, she realises she must tell him the truth about her compromised past, even at the price of her happiness. In this aria, she resolves to do just that.

Although Donizetti composed some fine roles for mezzos, he usually gave the leading female role to a soprano. But in the case of *La favorite,* the director of the opera house demanded the top spot for his mistress, a mezzo, and the ever-obliging Donizetti agreed. It is said he composed the final act in just four hours.

13 **L'aborrita rivale ('My hated rival')**
from ***Aida*** (1871)
Amneris, the daughter of the King of Egypt, is in love with the warrior Radamès. He, however is in love with her hated rival Aida. When Radamès is accused of treason, Amneris offers to help him if he will confess his crimes and return her love.

With its show-stopping Triumphal March, spectacular ballet scenes, and parades of slaves and elephants, Aida is the grandest of all grand operas. But at its heart it is a straightforward love triangle, which offers to all three participants some of the most emotionally direct music Verdi ever composed. These are demanding roles, however, and require enormous reserves of power to soar over the huge orchestra.

14 **Parto, parto ('I'm leaving, I'm leaving')**
from ***La clemenza di Tito*** (1791)
Sesto is in love with the haughty Vitellia. When she orders him to kill the Emperor Tito and set fire to Rome in revenge for her father's usurpation, he is torn between his love for her and his duty to the noble Tito.

'Love makes fools of us all' goes the phrase. Mozart understood the sentiment, but instead of treating Sesto as a besotted fool, he shows the character's dilemma in sympathetic and tender music. The addition of a basset clarinet, winding its plangent notes around the singer's melody, is a magical touch.

15 **Ombra mai fu ('Never was a shade')**
from ***Serse*** (1738)
Serse (Xerxes), the king of Persia, sings this aria to a tree, thanking the plant for giving him shade.

The historian Herodotus tells us that Serse once admired a plane tree so much that he decorated it with gold, and left a guard to protect it. Serse's first aria, although beautiful, prepares us to see the plant-mad king as a slightly comical figure, and sets the tone for the rest of this witty and sly opera.

16 **Quel giorno ('That Day')**
from ***Semiramide*** (1823)
The young warrior Arsace, in his first aria, rejoices to see his homeland of Babylon once more. He is unsure why he has been called home, but declares his love for Princess Azema.

Some say that *Semiramide* is Rossini's farewell to the world of tragic Italian opera, for he moved to Paris after the premiere, and subsequently composed operas almost exclusively in French. For his valediction, he decided to revive the waning tradition of a travesty hero, and give the lead male role to a mezzo. Since the title role of Semiramide is also low, it means the primary dramatic couple are of the same Fach, which is quite rare.

17 **Mein Schlaf ist Träumen**
('My sleep is dreaming')
from ***Siegfried*** (1876)
Wotan, the king of the gods, summons the earth goddess Erda, to ask about the future. Erda, sleepy and confusingly oracular, is unable to offer him anything clear. Dismissed, she sinks back into the earth.

In the *Ring Cycle* (Wagner's cycle of four music dramas, of which *Siegfried* is the third) the orchestra does as much of the dramatic work as the singers. Around Erda's music, the orchestra weaves a web of *Leitmotifs* – snatches of melodies which represent objects, places and other characters in the cycle – which tell us more about her ambiguous utterances than she appears to know herself.

18 **Re del'abisso ('King of the abyss')**
from ***Un ballo in maschera*** (1859)
The sorceress Ulrica summons the King of the Abyss so that she may work her magical powers.

When Verdi created female characters in touch with the darker impulses of human nature, he instinctively exploited their lower registers. Ulrica is one of his great creations, and her music calls forth all the vocal power which a mezzo can offer.

19 **Habañera** from ***Carmen*** (1875)
Carmen's entrance aria is a provocative song about the rebellious and untameable nature of love.

Like the *Seguidilla* which opens this collection, the *Habañera* is based on another Spanish dance. The descending opening notes of the tune seem to suggest that love is waning; but the rising harmonies on the word 'amour' suggest a hope that it can be found again – if not in the same place, then perhaps elsewhere. Thus the entire plot of *Carmen* is contained in this famous aria.

Warwick Thompson
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Warwick Thompson

Warwick Thompson is a freelance journalist, presenter, and accompanist, specialising in vocal music and opera. His work has appeared in *Metro*, *The Times*, *Bloomberg.com*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Opera*, *Opera Now*, *Pianist Magazine*, and in many other outlets. He has also frequently hosted educational events for Glyndebourne Festival Opera.

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The mezzo-soprano voice, lower than a soprano but higher than a contralto, yet possessing the qualities of both, is notable for a wide vocal range and colour that is especially suitable for operatic roles. It is used to portray characters such as Rossini's lovestruck heroines or the seductive Carmen. Donizetti's *bel canto* lyricism also contrasts sharply with Verdi's dramatic roles, and when a full-throated mezzo gets her teeth into the dark and thrilling *Macbeth,* the rewards are immense. With characters ranging from the youthfully ebullient Isabella in Rossini's *L'Italiana* in *Algeri* to the emotionally tortured Amneris in Verdi's *Aida,* all of operatic life can be found here.

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Mezzo-soprano and Contralto

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7	**Camille SAINT-SAËNS** (1835–1921) **Samson et Dalila ('Samson and Delilah')** Mon cœur s'ouvre à ta voix	5:40
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A detailed track list can be found inside the booklet

Includes comprehensive booklet notes in English

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